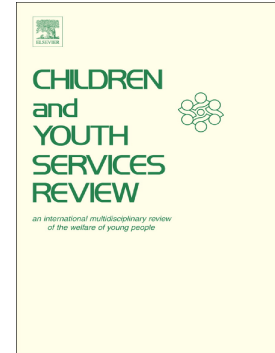


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M. Ángeles Balsells, Nuria Fuentes-Peláez, Crescencia Pastor



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Listening to the voices of children in decision-making: a challenge to the child protection system in Spain

M. Ángeles Balsells^{a,*}, Nuria Fuentes-Peláez^b, and Crescencia Pastor^b

^aUniversity of Lleida, Faculty of Education, Psychology and Social Work, Avenue of Estudi General, 4, Lleida 25001, Spain.

^bUniversity of Barcelona. Faculty of Education, Walk of the Vall d'Hebron, Barcelona 08035, Spain.

*Corresponding autor. Tel.: +34 973706576. E-mail address: balsells@pip.udl.cat

Highlights

- Importance of listening to the experiences of children, parents and professionals involved in the process.
- Professionals must consider children as subjects with rights in order to include their voices in the decision-making process.
- There is a lack of communication and implication of children at the time of removal and reunification.
- The lack of participation in the process carries with it a risk to the success of the reunification and stability.

Abstract:

The right of children to participate in decisions that impact their lives has been widely recognized, but it is scarcely present in decision-making processes within the protection system. Although research is providing evidence of the benefits of such participation, we still know little about its presence in family reunification processes. This paper examines the voices of children and adolescents at the time of removal and reunification within the child protection process. The perspectives of 135 persons were taken through in-depth interviews and group discussions: 30 children and adolescents, 42 biological parents, and 63 professionals of the protection system. The results suggest that 1) the information provided to children and adolescents is inaccurate and incomplete at all stages of the decision-making process; 2) the degree of understanding of the reasons underlying decision-making is minimal; 3) the main reason for removal is a modulator for participation; and 4) the participation of children and adolescents in the reunification process contributes to its success and stability. The practical implications concern both the need to train professionals and the establishment of mechanisms that ensure participation in the continuum of the development of the case plan.

Keywords: child protection, children, participation, reunification, removal, decision-making

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Listening to the voices of children in decision-making: a challenge for the child protection system in Spain

Highlights

- It is important to listen to the experiences of children, parents and professionals who are involved in the child protection process.
- Professionals must consider children as subjects with rights and include their voices in the decision-making process.
- There is a lack of communication with and a consideration of the implications on children at the times of removal and reunification.
- The lack of children's participation in the process carries with it a risk to the success of reunification and stability.

Abstract:

The right of children to participate in decisions that impact their lives has been widely recognized, but it is scarcely present in the decision-making processes within the child protection system. Although research provides evidence of the benefits of such participation, we still know little about its presence in family reunification processes. This paper examines the voices of children and adolescents at the time of removal and reunification in the child protection process. The perspectives of 135 persons were taken through in-depth interviews and group discussions, namely, 30 children and adolescents, 42 biological parents, and 63 professionals in the child protection system. The results suggest that 1) the information that is provided to children and adolescents is inaccurate and incomplete at all stages of the decision-making process, 2) the degree of understanding the reasons that underlie the decision-making is minimal, 3) the main reason for removal defines how the child is involve in participation, and 4) the participation of children and adolescents in the reunification process contributes to its success and stability. The practical implications concern both the need to train professionals and the establishment of mechanisms that ensure children's participation on the continuum of the development of the case plan.

Keywords: child protection, children, participation, reunification, removal, decision-making

1. Introduction

There are various alternatives for the welfare of children and adolescents at risk in Spain. When a child is found in a situation of ill treatment or abandonment there is the possibility of remaining with the biological parents (who are then monitored) or the removal from the biological family. In the latter case the alternatives are fostering in residential homes, foster care (in kinship or non-kinship families) or adoption. In the first two cases the removal from the family nucleus is expected to be a temporary measure (Balsells et al., 2013). According to official statistics in 2011 Spain had 35,505 open cases of children under protection separated from their biological families. These children were considered to be in a high risk situation affecting their personal development according to Child Protection Services. 14,059 of them were placed in foster family care and 21,446 were placed in residential care (Ministerio de Salud y Políticas Sociales, 2012).

Since the Convention of the Rights of the Child was passed in 1989, the right for children to participate in decisions that affect their lives was established (Van Bijleveld et al. 2013; Alderson 2000; Bachman & Chase-Lansdale 2005; Hart 1992; Shier 2001), this also includes the situations of child protection (Fuentes-Peláez et al. 2013; Mitchell et al. 2010; Nybell 2013; Schnoor 2013). However, the current policies of child protection advocate for giving children a voice and recognize the right the children have to express what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account when adults are making decisions that affect them. This is particularly important when the decisions imply the separation of a child from their family or the child's return home. Recent studies in Spain reveal the reality, Montserrat (2014) found that between 66.7% and 73.4% of children and adolescents experience a traumatic entry into the Child Protection System and very little information. In addition, recent research in Spain which has taken into account the voice of adolescents in temporary care, reveals that they have a limited, inaccurate or nonexistent understanding of the child protection measure, showing that they are unclear about its implications (Balsells et al., 2010; Fuentes et al., 2013; Mateos, Vaquero, Balsells and Ponce, 2016).

2.- Decision-making in the process of child protection

The process of decision-making in the child protection system occurs on a continuum that has the four key moments of screening, assessment, placement, and reunification (Baumann, Fluke, & Casillas, 2012). The decisions of removal and reunification have special relevance to the life of children because of their short- and long-term influences on children's lives (Farmer, 2014).

Up to this point, the majoritarian model of evaluation and intervention in the child protection system has been developed with the involvement of a professional in the decision-making processes. The professional collects and evaluates information to make a unilateral (or a multilateral, i.e., among a group of professionals) decision concerning vulnerability. The Decision-Making Ecology (DME) (Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011) has helped us to analyze and understand what factors are behind (or influence) this decision-making. Accordingly, an investigation of the child protection

workers in Israel showed the lack of impact of the wishes of mothers and children in this process: neither the wishes of the mother regarding removal nor the wishes of the child in relation to reunification had any impact on the risk evaluations and recommendations of the workers (Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008). Further research that involved 828 protection services professionals from four countries (Israel, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, and Spain) also showed that parental opinions are not considered by the professionals in any of these countries (Benbenishty et al., 2015).

Scientific studies have identified four key factors relating to professionals which explain the lack of impact of the wishes of parents and children in the decision-making process. These factors are professional experience, training, attitude and context. Several studies have investigated how professional experience is one factor that determines the threshold of decision-making (Benbenishty, Osmo, & Gold, 2003; Benbenishty & Osmo, 2004; Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001), (Gold et al., 2001). Other studies reveal aspects relating to the attitudes of the professionals indicating how they rate the risk and their recommendations concerning the intervention (Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2010).; ; Training will affect the professionals' awareness of the impact that their attitudes and the context in which they are embedded have on their judgments and decisions (Benbenishty et al., 2015). ; The social, political and cultural context of professionals in different countries affects their evaluation of the situation and their subsequent recommendations for the intervention process (Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001).

In this regard, a change in the perspective of child protection systems is beginning to be observed that gives a more active role to family members and other agents that relates to the well-being of the child. The perspectives that support this trend are family preservation, the prospect of strength and empowerment, and the ecological model. (Amoros, Pastor, Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, Molina & Mateos, 2009; Milani, Serbati, lus, Di Masi, 2013; Rodrigo, Máiquez Martín-Quintana, 2010). Listening to the voices of families in decision-making increases their likelihood of success, given that the direct participation of families in the decisions that affect them makes them more likely to collaborate and to take the necessary actions (Burford & Hudson, 2002). Other benefits when the voices of families are heard have been noted, namely, that the family feels empowered, family conflict decreases, and institutional plans are better understood; similarly, professionals feel that the child will be better protected and reunification is more stable when families participate in decision-making (Balsells, Pastor, Mateos, Vaquero, & Urrea, 2015) (Baumann et al., 2012). Progress is clearly being made to incorporate families, but regarding the incorporation of children, the situation is unclear.

3.- The voices of children in the decision-making process

The right of children to participate in decisions that affect their lives was established with the approval of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (Van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2013); (Alderson, 2000; Bachman & Chase-Lansdale, 2005; Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001) (Alderson, 2000; Bachman & Chase-Lansdale, 2005; Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001), including child and adolescent protection situations (Fuentes-Peláez, Amoros, Balsells, Mateos, & Violant, 2013; Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010; Nybell, 2013; Schnoor, 2013).

Nonetheless, the reality of the practices in protection systems tends to show a lack of attention to the voices of children in decision-making. Based on interviews with children, adolescents, and youth who have gone through the system, Goodyer (2014; 2013) and Mateos, Vaquero, Balsells and Ponce (2016) investigate how decisions either do not consider the perspectives of children or adolescents or typically do not attend to their needs of being informed regarding what measures and changes will occur in their lives.

Fuentes-Peláez and Amorós (2008), Jiménez, Martínez, and Mata (2010), and Jiménez, Martínez Muñoz, and León (2013) defend the need of children to have access to information and prepare at each stage of the protection process with the objective of being able to face the changes that occur in their family situation and where they live. Barnes (2012), Mcleod (2007), and Gilian Schofield and Beek (2005) agree that listening to and informing children not only fulfills their right to participate but also guarantees more positive and effective results in protection plans. Schofield et al. (2011) argue that the fact of being heard reinforces positive feelings in the child toward him- or herself, and Gilligan (2000) supplements this thesis by adding that a child being heard is even positive for assessing the impact and quality of the offered services. Participation can be an element of protection for children because it typically leads to an increase in confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Gilian Schofield & Beek, 2005) (Limber & Kaufman, 2002). These benefits have also been featured in two studies on children's involvement in legal decision-making (Block, Oran, Oran, Baumrind, & Goodman, 2010; Weisz, Wingrove, Beal, & Faith-Slaker, 2011); the results suggest how children's adjustment to the measures (i.e., foster families or a return home) can be influenced by the lack of information and participation in the process and suggest that policies that encourage children's attendance at dependency hearings are viewed positively by and are not harmful to children.

A study by Mitchel et al. (2010), who investigated children who had gone through the system, shows that they want to participate more in the removal decision-making process regarding aspects that relate to their new home, visits with their biological family members, and their school. Goodyer (2014) also shows that children and adolescents demand more participation in the removal decision and have an explicit desire to be consulted when a decision is made to separate them from their biological family.

Linked to the participation of children in the protection system, other studies attempt to discern children's ability to participate in relation to their age (Holland, 2006) and show that professionals identify age as a determining factor in the ability of young people (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Holland & Scourfield, 2004; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). A crucial dilemma regarding child participation is what occurs when the child's perspective contradicts the professional opinion concerning the child's primary interest (Archard & Skivenes, 2009). In this sense, Chan, Lam, and Shae (2011) argue that the opinion and understanding of children on issues of child abuse and neglect serve to inform and improve the work of child protection, even if they do not match the opinions of adults, and children must be heard in any child protection work.

Although we do not know or know little about the wishes and needs of younger children, in the case of adolescents and young people, we can observe how child protection has advanced. A study that focused on 57 adolescents in foster family status

in extended families in Spain finds that during placement, their interests and priorities revolve around knowing their family problems, the characteristics of the protection resources, and the changes that they can expect in their lives (Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, Mateo, Mateos, & Violant, 2010; Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2013; Mateos, Balsells, Molina, & Fuentes-Peláez, 2012). This study reveals the adolescents' lack of awareness concerning their own personal history and the reasons for their foster home placement and prioritizes the fact that adolescents should be incorporated into the decision-making processes that affect them.

The participation of children and adolescents in the decision-making process occurs on a continuum. Different levels are set in the decision-making in families that range from systems in which families are not included in meetings or other forums in which decisions are made about their children to systems in which families, along with their support network, craft initial plans that are subsequently shared with professionals who work collaboratively with the family to ensure that the plans are attainable and meet the highest standards to achieve the goals of safety, permanency, and well-being (Merkel-Holguin & Wilmot, 2005). Similarly, there is a progressive system of child participation. The study by Cossar, Brandon, and Jordan (2014) establishes three levels in the understanding of the processes of the protection system. First, with A) minimal understanding, young people in this category know that they have a social worker who talks to them, visits, and takes notes, but they do not know what the social worker's role is; if their parents go to meetings, they do not take notice of it. With B) partial understanding, young people in this category know that their parents go to meetings, but they do not actually know why; they are trying to gather information, similar to solving a puzzle, and many of them say that they receive more information from their family (parents and older siblings) than from the professionals, and much of the information that they have is inaccurate. Finally, with C) clear understanding, the young people in this category know the processes of the protection system well. This study shows that the children who are most likely to have a clear understanding are older children (ages 14-17 years), whereas the majority of the children have a partial understanding.

4. Methods

The objectives of this study are to examine the "voices of children" at the time of removal and reunification by the child protection process in Spain and to identify the most relevant aspects of these voices' participation, both in the risk assessment and in the decision-making process that occurs at each of these times.

4.1. Approach

This study is a descriptive study based on the qualitative approach. It includes an exploratory design by using discussion groups and semi-structured interviews with

multiple informants, namely, professionals from child protection services and parents, children, and adolescents who are involved in the process of family reunification. The multi-informant character of this study allows for the discovery of relevant aspects, as viewed from the perspectives of children and professionals.

4.2. Sample and sampling procedures

There were 135 participants: 30 were children or adolescents who had gone through a process of either family or residential care, 42 were parents who either recently reunified or had plans for reunification, and 63 were professionals who worked in children's protection services.

This children and parents were attending family specialized services and children were in residential care or in a foster care family. This study involved professionals from three different sections of the child protection services system: family specialized services, services to support foster care and residential care institutions.

The services were from Catalonia, The Balearic Islands, Galicia and Cantabria. These professionals selected the children and their parents based on confidential information. The researchers provided professionals with a set of criteria to help them select children and their parents.

The selection criteria were as follows. The children had to (1) be between 12 and 20 years old and be related to the selected biological families, (2) have spent at least one year in foster care, and (3) have no physical, mental, or sensory incapacity. The parents had to (1) be families who were relatives of the children and adolescents who are described above, (2) be families who were already reunified or were waiting to be reunified in the next one or two months, (3) be families who had undergone or were undergoing a reunification plan, (4) be families with a positive attitude and predisposition toward collaboration with professionals, and (5) be heterogeneous families (i.e., different ages of the parents and children/adolescents, diverse types of family structures, etc.). Finally, the professionals had to (1) work in the children's protection system, (2) have experience in residential or family care, and (3) be representative of the multi-disciplinary nature of professionals, that is, they must come from various areas of training, including social educators, pedagogues, psychologists, and social workers.

Using these criteria, a convenience sample (non-probabilistic sample) of mothers, fathers and children were selected depending on how feasible it was for them to take part in the investigation. The sampling did not seek fathers, mothers and children who were related, as the family variable was not selected.

The characteristics of the professionals, the parents, and the children and adolescents who participated in this study are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

Characteristics	Professionals (N=63)
Gender	

Women	47 (75%)
Men	16 (25%)
Age (years)	
25-35	16 (26%)
36-45	29 (45%)
Over 46	18 (29%)
Training	
Social educators	20 (32%)
Pedagogues	10 (16%)
Psychologists	20 (32%)
Social workers	13 (21%)
Focus of intervention	
Biological family	37 (59%)
Children in Residential Care	16 (25%)
Children in Family Foster Care	10 (16%)

Table 1. Characteristics of the participating professionals

Characteristics	Parents (N=42)
Gender	
Women	32 (76%)
Men	10 (24%)
Family situation	
Reunified	37 (88%)
Undergoing reunification	05 (12%)

Table 2. Characteristics of the participating parents

Characteristics	Children and adolescents (N=30)
Gender	
Girls	16 (53%)
Boys	14 (47%)
Age (years)	
6-11	05 (17%)
12-17	17 (57%)
Over 18	08 (27%)
Family situation	
Reunified	21 (70%)
Undergoing reunification	09 (30%)

Table 3. Characteristics of the participating children and adolescents

4.3. Data collection

Discussion groups and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. We used two instruments regarding the focus group including (1) an identification form to collect basic data on the participants, (2) a guide to develop the discussion groups and

semi-structured interviews (with different questions that were adapted for each interviewed group of children, parents, and professionals). The transcription of the interview was prepared as a result of a review of the scientific literature on the subject in which key elements to be investigated were detected. The focus of the questions sought to provide opportunities for the participants to present their experiences in the processes of removal and reunification, such as how these processes occurred, what the participants' feelings were, what assistance they received, etc. Thus, these experiences were expressed from the perspectives of the involved parents, children, and professionals.

4.4. Procedures

The discussion groups were specific to each group: child, parents and professionals and all of them were held at the headquarters of the social services of each community.

Two researchers went to each child protection service to collect data; one researcher had the role of moderator or interviewer (depending on the case), and the other researcher controlled the technical aspects (recording) and checked that all the contents of the guide were addressed. Eighteen interviews were conducted, and 22 discussion groups were convened. To ensure the accuracy of the information, all interviews and discussion groups were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The content analysis was performed by inductive coding of transcripts. The first stage of the analysis was textual, and we selected paragraphs, fragments, and important quotes from the transcripts of the interviews and discussion groups. The second stage was conceptual, and we aimed to identify the categories and subcategories that may have been interrelated. These categories and subcategories were defined when the data reached saturation, i.e., the categories were finally established based on the repetitive answers of the participants (e.g., they did not offer additional topics). To process the qualitative data, ATLAS.ti 6.2 was used.

4.5. Reliability and credibility of the data and ethical considerations

In the transcriptions for the discussion groups and the semi-structured interviews, the language of the questions was adapted to the context and participants. The data were peer reviewed to maintain the reliability and credibility of the data.

The process of extracting codes and categories was evaluated by various judges. Accordingly, similar to the content analysis, this process was subjected to peer review to achieve the maximum reliability and credibility of the extracted data.

Ethical considerations were accounted for in this study by using an informed consent form signed by the participants, Privacy and Data Protection according to Spanish National Law (Real Decreto 1720/2007 and Ley Orgánica 15/1999) and the basic principles of ethics developed by the International guidelines of Horizon 2020.

5. Results

5.1. Removal decision and risk assessment

The results reveal that during the risk assessment process in the assessment phase, there is a lack of information to and participation of children and adolescents. In the case of younger children, when their parents have personal and familial difficulties, such as drug addiction or alcoholism, that affect their care and attention, the children are accustomed to not understanding the specific motives that have led to their foster care placement. One of the reasons for this lack of understanding is how daily experiences of neglect and abuse can lead to a normalization of the situation.

We know from the comments that they put things that are not the case. I never asked, but I am curious to ask why they accuse my mother of things that didn't happen. (Adolescent focus group)

In the cases in which the reasons that resulted in the intervention by protective services concerned a conflicting parent-child relationship and behavioral difficulties of the adolescents, these adolescents are more aware of the problems because they can identify the elements in their behavior that have led to difficulties in the family dynamic.

When I entered the center, I didn't talk to my mother for like two weeks [...] it made me think a lot, and, I don't know, it also helped me to think about the mistakes I had made and everything. (Adolescent focus group)

The professionals and the families themselves recognize the importance of children understanding the reasons for the separation, and they adjust the explanation to the developmental level of the children. They recognize that sometimes, they do not sufficiently adjust this explanation but that this is fundamental because it helps children to understand what is occurring and reduces the feelings of guilt that they may have.

I think that it is important, too, for the child to understand....that is, to explain to them that parents have problems that result in them not being able to be at home and that parents have to be able to try to work with them so that these problems are resolved. (Professional focus group)

When I was older, yes, but when I was younger, no. I told him that I had to have a home, a job, and that's it, and that, when we had everything, we would leave the center. Sometimes, she would ask, but it is true that, sometimes, I told her that she was too young to know about such things. (Parent focus group)

Similar to their very limited participation in the risk assessment process, the participation of children and adolescents is also limited when a decision to separate them from their biological family is being made. There are even occasions when they

are not informed before the action is performed. As a result, children and adolescents may find themselves in a very abrupt separation situation without anyone informing them, and they may not be given the time or space to properly prepare themselves. This lack of participation and information leads to a considerable amount of confusion in children and adolescents, which leads to an enormous emotional impact at the beginning of foster placement.

They practically did not give me any information, nothing more than that I was going with my sister for a while, a little while, and that was it. (Child interview)

Well, not to cast me off in that way, because I was extricated from home and it's as if someone had grabbed my shirt and pulled me out on the street, and I was not given explanations, and that impacted me. (Adolescent focus group)

Making decisions to separate a child from his or her biological family involves a series of implications that define the type of protective measure, including the legal features, rights and obligations of each family member, the visitation plan, the contact plan, and other practical aspects. The results show how the children and adolescents have a vague knowledge and understanding of the protective measure in general, in addition to their minimal participation in the decision-making process. The children and adolescents complain about this misinformation and express their interest in information and how useful it would have been to have been informed. They state that they would have liked for someone to have explained the reality of what was occurring and the implications of the separation process.

I would have liked to have been told that instead of telling me that I was going to go play, that they would have told me that they were going to separate me from my mother, that I was going to go play and, later, she would come and get me. (Adolescent focus group)

Another significant aspect at this stage is the decision on the placement resource that will temporarily replace the family, for example, a foster family, the extended family, or a residential center. Regarding the knowledge that children have concerning where they will reside as a protection resource, again, it is found that the children and adolescents have little or no participation in the decision, and they receive little information regarding the place where they are going to live. The difficulties that relate to parental acceptance of the protective measure may be one reason why foster placement is typically not made known. Nonetheless, communication with children at the time of separation and entry into the protection resource helps them considerably. It is found that it may even be interesting if the parents can explain the measure themselves and accompany their children to the foster placement, given that the moment of separation has an impact on a child's emotional management.

Communication to children, it is also very important that they can lead their lives with peace of mind and that the parents also understand that the children are living with this peace of mind. (Professional focus group)

On the one hand, there is the family and on the other hand, the children, and an effort must be made to communicate the deadlines and reasons in a more concrete manner. (Parent focus group)

These results have highlighted some contradictions amongst the informants; the moment when children are removed from their families is often fraught with emotion, children and parents find themselves in a state of shock and disbelief. This situation can make it very hard to assimilate the information given to families by professionals, so family members remember different versions of the same reality.

5.2. Reunification decision and risk assessment

The results identify a lack of general information that is given to children regarding the evolution of the reunification process. Family progress is at the core of the assessment at this stage of reunification, and again, there are differences between adolescents and younger children. Younger children know that there have been changes, but they are unable to specify what these changes are or what exactly they mean in the evolution of the process.

Well, since my mother had a drinking problem, my mother went to rehabilitate at a center. She was there for a few months and such, and we went to visit her once a month or something, and after she recovered, we got back together with our parents. (Adolescent focus group)

Ah, my nana found better work, a better home and was saving money to keep us. (Adolescent focus group)

Although the professionals share the need to keep the children informed so that they are aware of the process and the changes that will occur with their parents, many of these professionals prefer not to use the word reunification to avoid creating false hope.

From the center, we perform a progressive de-institutionalization. However, it is important not to tell, either the children or the parents, to do it progressively but without mentioning the word return. It is important to make them participants; in addition, they are already aware because, with your work, you are empowering the things that are improving, but if you advance the subject of the return, it has to be done following guidelines and very carefully. (Professional focus group)

When disruptive behavior of teenagers is amongst the reasons for separation, risk assessment can also be used as a reference for the changes that the adolescents themselves have undergone. In these cases, it can be observed that adolescents play a greater role in the assessment process because they know the reasons and they are

involved in the process of change, and in many cases, an awareness of the changes that occurred can be achieved.

The behavior, because my mother is already better, she had a lot of problems before, she found a job, she was a day-to-day woman, she drank alcohol, she got in trouble with the police...I changed a lot because I have always been nervous, I'm hyperactive, but I did not do crazy things like I used to, and the behavior and the attitude of my mother....doing things right has helped her get better.
(Adolescent focus group)

Issues such as when the return home will occur and how it will be done arise after the decision for reunification. Although children, families, and professionals share the need to explain to children how the reunification process will go and the implications that it will have, the truth is that if children have not been kept up to date with the assessment of the process and development of the case, then they will not be up to date on the decisions concerning reunification.

It was observed on many occasions that children are only being told about the decision to remove them shortly beforehand, which does not allow them much time to prepare. In this respect, the children and adolescents who were interviewed ask to be given a time period for them to know when reunification will occur and to prepare themselves for it, given that it tends to be communicated sometimes in an abrupt manner and at other times, without prior notice.

They never warn you until the day you are leaving. On the day you leave, they notify you in the morning when they wake you up; they tell you, "Get your backpack ready since you are going there later". (Adolescent focus group)

They told me that I had to pack my suitcase because I was going back home. I packed my suitcase, they came to pick me up, and I left. They took me home, and that was it. They did not tell me anything; they sent me home directly. (Child interview)

This lack of participation in the process prior to their return home carries with it a risk to the success of the reunification because in the majority of cases, changes in the family context and in the home have occurred that the children are unaware of. However, the importance of the bonds that developed with the peer group at the residence, the professionals, or the foster family that are created during the child's stay makes the farewell from the foster family or the center fundamental to an optimal return home. The child has gotten to know other people, has made friends, and verbalizes difficulties in accepting new changes in his or her life. Simultaneously, there is a feeling of "sadness" concerning this new separation; children may think that they are betraying the people who have welcomed and cared for them during a very important time in their life.

- *Uncomfortable, strange, I did not expect it.*

- *They let me know, they packed my bags, and the next day, we went to my mother's house, and I felt uncomfortable. If you live with your grandmother for years and then they send you to live with your parents, you feel a little strange, you don't feel the same affection toward your mother that you felt for your*

grandmother, it is a different treatment. I also felt strange, the house was smaller, it smelled differently, my father was old, everything was very different ...

(Adolescent focus group)

6. Discussion

This study provides the perspectives of children and adolescents, families, and professionals on the relevant topic of removal and reunification. The viewpoint of each group contributes to understanding and expanding the knowledge on how the “voices of children” are considered at both moments of removal and reunification and makes it possible to locate some relevant aspects on the continuum of the child protection decision-making process. The Decision-Making Ecology Model (DME) (Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011) has allowed us to observe the risk evaluation analytically and to take decisions as each stage of the process develops.

Our results indicate how children and adolescents do not take an active role in the evaluation or in the decision-making processes at the time of removal. This finding confirms the results that were obtained by Montserrat (2014) who finds that between 66.7% and 73.4% of affected children agree that entry into the child protection system was traumatic: it occurs suddenly, without them being consulted, and with very little information about where they are going, why they are going, and what is going to occur. This lack of information to children adds greater anguish and confusion to the situation of being separated from their biological family, which is in itself traumatic. Inaccurate and incomplete information is a constant in the narratives of the participants in this study. Thus, we agree with Goodyer (2014) Scholfield et al. (2011), and Mateos, Vaquero, Balsells, and Ponce (2016) that the participation of the child must be ensured and that the implications for the child must be considered throughout the entire evaluation and decision-making processes; moreover, the practice of unannounced separation should be eliminated and information should be given to the most affected children.

Thus, the first contribution of this study is that the opinion and participation of children and adolescents have little or no incidence in the decision-making process of child protection; the typical practices in this respect distill a symbolic participation of children in which the degree of understanding is the minimum that is described by Cossar et al. (2014), and this symbolic participation appears as the reality that is most frequently narrated by the participants in this study. Independent of age, reasons, and stages of the process, there is no minimum guarantee of child participation that would, according to Hart (1992), consist of children being “assigned but informed”, that is, knowing who makes the decisions and why. The little impact of children’s opinions on the assessments or recommendations of child protection workers that was found by Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty (2008) has been confirmed in this study according to the reality of the child protection system in Spain.

Prior studies indicate the relevance that children and adolescents assign to having their voices heard at all times (Goodyer, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2010) (Goodyer, 2011). The reported situations show us gaps in three aspects at the time of removal, namely, a) a lack of awareness of the reason for separation, b) a lack of knowledge or hasty

information concerning the measure that is being taken (i.e., the temporariness of the measure and the separation process), and c) misinformation or a lack of participation in the decision regarding the protection resource (i.e., where and with whom the children will live).

Another input from our study is the emergence of the reason for the separation as a modulator of the participation of children and adolescents. The age factor is one of the most relevant aspects in determining the participation of children and how the exercise of children's rights depends on the judgment of adults concerning children's capability (Holland, 2006) (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Holland & Scourfield, 2004; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998); thus, workers seem to identify age as a determining factor of capability in young people. Nonetheless, we agree with Cossar et al. (2014) who support the idea that age is a relevant factor in determining the degree of participation and capability, but it is not the only factor. A risk assessment on the grounds of neglect and abuse promotes a more protectionist tendency toward children and an understanding that they must be protected from their biological family without the need to reveal the reasons for their protection, whereas when conflict and the disruptive behaviors of children are one of the reasons for separation (typically in the case of adolescents), the information that they are given and their participation are greater (Balsells et al., 2014). What it reveals here is the difficulty that professionals have when they need to communicate the measure to children depending on their age.

A third contribution of this study involves the moment of reunification. Up to now, very few studies have recognized the influential role that children play in the process of reunification, and very few studies have taken a participatory and active agent approach in which guidelines could be established regarding the inclusion of children in reunification. Our investigation emphasizes the following three key elements in the participation of children and adolescents concerning reunification: a) in the assessment of the progress of the family as a reason for reunification; b) in the decision-making of the coordinates of the reunification (what, how, and when reunification will occur); and c) participation in the transition to and in the bereavement for the losses that are entailed in the return home (i.e., leaving the foster family and educators and peers from the center, etc.). This study identifies and recognizes the influential role that children play as an element in the stability and success of reunification. According to Lee, Hwang, Socha, Pau, and Shaw (2013) and Balsells, Pastor, Molina, Fuentes-Peláez, and Vázquez (2016). Concerning the implications for practice, firstly, it refers to the training of professionals. The participation of children in decision-making is not an easy task and requires greater preparation. There should be training in strategies and skills to foster a trusting relationship and better communication that increases children's level of understanding. This can be achieved by specific emphasis on how to communicate the measure to children by taking their age into consideration to ensure the right use of language in the explanation. A factor that is recognized as a promoter of participation is the quality of the relationship between the child and the professional. Groza (1996), Mainey, Ellis, and Lewis (2009), Rees et al. (2010), and Schofield and Thoburn (1996)

outline the qualities that children look for in adults who support them, namely, being a good listener, having empathy, showing warmth, being honest, having an informal but professional approach, showing interest and commitment, being respectful and reliable, and being ready to take action. Our results match the findings of other studies that suggest that children need to trust the professionals to practice participation (2002, 2011; Rees et al., 2010). There should be training on the development of positive attitudes toward the participation of children to internalize this change in view.

The second implication for practice involves introducing the key elements that are found in the participation of children on the continuum of the decision-making of all planning and implementation processes. The significance of facilitating children and adolescents' transitions and the benefits of their participation in the entire process, which gives them greater security and ability to face the difficulties that are inherent to the experiences of both removal and reunification, has been proven. Thus, increasing participation, from the moments of evaluation to the moments of implementation, can give greater meaning to the work with children and adolescents. If we understand participation as a strategy of self-evaluation, it should have continuity in the establishment of the work plan and its implementation (Milani, Serbati, & Ius, 2011; Milani, Serbati, Ius, Di Masi, & Zanon, 2013). The combination of the practice of intervention with the practice of evaluation is a way for children and adolescents to become the protagonists of their assessment process, their actions, and their evaluations.

7. Conclusion

The participation in decision-making, by both parents and children, is an aspect that promotes reunification. In fact, children's understanding and recognition of their parent's efforts to achieve reunification is a relevant element to the success of reunification. It is important for children not only to know which changes justified their return to the home but also to have feelings of pride for having achieved these accomplishments and to recognize the accomplishments of their family members. This reinforcement of oneself and others increases the feelings of family identity and is a protective factor of families because it aids in conserving the family unit (Balsells et al., 2013; Balsells, Amorós, Fuentes-Peláez, & Mateos, 2011; Bullock, Little, & Milham, 1993; Fernández del Valle & Fuertes, 2007; Lietz & Strength, 2011). Accordingly, one's participation in deciding how and when the return home will occur will strengthen one's involvement, commitment, and responsibility.

To strengthen the capacities of each family member and to identify as a family unit, everyone must feel like an essential piece in the intervention and must know and feel recognized for their role in the family and in the reunification process. Thus, it is considered necessary that all family members feel that they are agents of change who can achieve improvements and be sources of support. Accordingly, it can be concluded that to increase the probability of the success of family reunifications, it is crucial that all members of the family are aware of the real changes that are prompted by the return home, reinforce one another concerning achievements, are proud of their

accomplishments and the accomplishments of other family members, and always consider that they are part of a whole that is called “family” and that they must fit together and complement one another.

The present research has different limitations that should be considered to understand the results and conclusions of the study. Some limitations of the research relate to the participants. The participants of the study were mostly adults (105), and there were only 30 children and adolescent participants. If the inclusion of more children and adolescents’ voices was possible, then perhaps the research would have offered richer knowledge. However, including more of these participants was not possible because of the limited number of children and adolescents who were able and willing to participate in the research. In addition, we consider that it is important to know how professionals and families value the participation of children in their processes of foster care and reunification. Another limitation of the present study is the lack of research in the scientific literature regarding child participation in Spain. This lack of studies has made the discussion regarding the literature and the comparison of our results with other similar results in our same context more difficult.

The investigation reveals the importance of listening to the experiences of children, parents and professionals involved in the process. In addition, it reveals a contradiction between what is recalled by the children, by adults and by the professionals whose understanding of the situation depends on their emotional perspective. However, these contradictory realities have identified the need for a future investigation to compare the different perspectives: What are the viewpoints of these different groups? And why do they differ so much?

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